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Inviting Students and Teachers to Connect

In an era of standardized testing, students and their teacher find authentic ways to connect through dialogue journals.

When Elena handed me her dialogue journal that Wednesday, I had no idea she was giving me a part of her aching heart. I didn't know that the pages would expose a hurtful and silent dynamic that had been taking place since the beginning of the school year. Elena is a reserved, respectful student in my 6th-grade English language learner (ELL) inclusion reading group. Her entry title "We aren't B.F.F. (Best Friends Forever)" started with a question, "Did you know that Karla was my best friend?" As Elena's entry unfolded, I read of her confusion, anger, and hurt over a lost friendship. This was soul-baring writing that she had invited me to read.

AN INVITATION FOR ME TO INQUIRE

The journey that led me to read Elena's words started as an inquiry born from a desire to connect with my learners and encourage them as writers. I am an ELL teacher at two different elementary campuses. I'm responsible for three different levels of instruction: (1) pull-out English language development (ELD), (2) inclusion services, and (3) the monitoring of students who have exited the ELL program. I work in tandem with the mainstream classroom teachers, and I'm continually seeking updates from them. At one point, the main concern of many upper-elementary teachers regarding our diverse language learners was their writing. The high-stakes state standardized tests were looming, and test preparations were in high gear. In mainstream classrooms, all students were given a prompt and allowed ample time to generate a writing sample. It was after reviewing some of these samples that one 5th-grade teacher approached me, concerned: "Can you help Ray and Sara with their writing?"

This teacher was worried that Ray and Sara, two diverse language learners, would not meet standards on the writing portion of the *AIMS*, the

Arizona test created to fulfill federal mandates. The *No Child Left Behind Act* has intensified the pressures of high-stakes standardized testing, and teachers often feel the impact. It affects what and how we teach, leaving little room for educational innovations (Edelsky, 2006). In some cases, the culture of schooling has dissolved into a focus on facts and isolated, lower-order thinking skills that will help students do well on the test instead of a focus on meaningful instruction that supports deep understanding (Meier, 2000). This results in "a narrowing of the curriculum and the imposition of a restricted, often official view of what constitutes knowledge" (Swope & Miner, 2000, p. 8).

For the students who are adding English to their language repertoire, this increased emphasis on testing can be crippling to teachers and students alike. Not only is it well documented that standardized tests are biased and discriminatory against the English language learner (Meier, 2000), but this shift toward a more narrow view of knowledge is contrary to what we know about successful language acquisition strategies and effective writing instruction for our ELL population. Language lives and grows in a social setting (Faltis, 2006; Pérez & Torres-Guzmán, 2002). It does not take place in the learner's head, but rather it is "co-constructed and distributed across communities of practice, and it happens when learners claim membership and affiliation through active participation in the knowledge systems of these communities" (Faltis, 2006, p. 134).

It is crucial for the teacher to provide opportunities for the language learner to gain access to the learning communities that are present in the classroom. Teachers must create literacy tasks where a linguistically diverse student can be successful and gain the tools required to create the symbolic capital required for full participation in the classroom (Christian & Bloome, 2004). The context of these literacy tasks must be meaningful and relevant

for the language learner; writing should be used for real audiences with varied purposes and with “a focus on function and content, not language forms” (Pérez & Torres-Guzmán, 2002, p. 73). And there must be an abundance of meaningful writing tasks, as written language is “acquired through actual use” (Edelsky, 2006, p. 71). Practicing for the state tests, which entails writing a response to a contrived prompt, places the students in “confined roles as powerless responders” and “will only lead to a narrow use of literacy, . . . and limited literacy growth” (Pérez & Torres-Guzmán, 2002, p. 111). Every child deserves more.

My own ideas about literacy also disrupt the notion that writing is merely a response to a prompt provided by a state test or teacher. Like Calkins’s (1994) early work, I know that in order to create conditions or a community that supports writing, I need to encourage an environment where the writing is personal and interpersonal (p. 14). That is, the writing needs to come from the experiences of the learner, and it needs to be shared with someone. I also believe that all children, regardless of what languages they speak, have “real, human reasons to write” and that as a mentor, I need to show them that their lives are “worth writing about” by allowing them to choose what they write (Calkins, 1994). I see writing as a way to catch a moment, hold it up to the light, marvel in it, and then, using words, further explore and share the wonderment.

I had two major problems to face when implementing this inquiry project. First, I had a logistical challenge. Only a few of my students qualify for pull-out instruction, a setting where I could directly address writing. Other students have exited the ELL program within the last two years and no longer qualify for any direct services, so I don’t have any scheduled contact hours with them. Some of my students are in the mainstream classroom, where I usually help in an inclusion setting during the students’ reading time. I may help edit a draft occasionally, but normally I assist with reading skills and vocabulary. How could I work effectively with these three distinct groups: the pull-out students, the inclusion students, and those students who have “graduated” from the pull-out program?

My second problem was deciding what this writing instruction would look like. My stu-

dents were already receiving lessons that focused on writing traits and the writing process in their mainstream classrooms. I needed something different to add to their menu of writing that would fit into our unique constraints. What could it be?

I used a research method called reflective journaling that allowed me to explore and validate my own professional experiences. Through this, I realized that using dialogue journals with my students might be the answer to my puzzle. Dialogue journals are written exchanges between teacher and student that take place in a designated notebook on a regular basis. The writing is student-generated and the teacher responds as a full participant in a type of written conversation. There is no evaluation, correction of spelling, or “teacherly” comments, such as “Good job!” or “Please use proper

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punctuation.” In addition, the actual writing can take place in any location at any time (Peyton & Reed, 1990). As I launched into a systematic inquiry of my own practice, I began to implement dialogue journals, looking

especially at how they worked with my upper-elementary diverse language learners.

Of my three clusters of student writers, the first group, my pull-out students, worked with me outside of their usual classroom for a period of 30–40 minutes each day. Connie and Carolyn are both from South Korea, and while Connie, a fourth-grader, had studied English in her own country, Carolyn, a fifth-grader, had not. Carlos was a ten-year-old from South America who was also encountering English for the first time. All three were recent arrivals, having lived in the United States less than one year.

My next writing group included Ray, Sara, and Ahmed. Ray and Sara were recent graduates of the English Language Learner’s program, having achieved the level of *proficient*—as defined by Arizona’s standardized English language test. Ahmed, a bilingual student who spends summers overseas, never did qualify for ELL services based on his scores on the state’s language test. None of these students received any direct contact hours with me, but as the campus specialist, their fifth-grade teacher approached me with concerns regarding their writing skills.

Finally, my third group—Elena, Karla, Pablo, and Victor—were all sixth-grade ELL inclusion students. I helped them daily with their reading

assignments and vocabulary. While Pablo and Victor had both arrived from South America the year before, Karla and Elena had lived in the United States almost their entire lives.

AN INVITATION FOR STUDENTS TO WRITE

In early February, I reached for two small yellow composition notebooks and gave them to Carlos and Connie; I explained that we would begin to dialogue through their journals. I told them to write three times a week about anything they wanted. They could write at home; they could write on the playground; they could write in their classrooms. On Wednesdays, I would collect the journals and write back. I would not correct spelling or grammar. I would not be grading their entries. In an effort to communicate this information to my newest 5th-grade English learner, Carolyn, I sent home a letter of explanation to her bilingual siblings with her blank notebook.

Next, I gathered the students I monitor and presented each with a new composition notebook. I invited them to write, just as I invited Carlos, Connie, and Carolyn. Ray, Ahmed, and Sara, all 5th-graders, snatched up the notebooks and committed to writing three times a week. Who can resist a new notebook, awaiting the smooth dance of a pen or pencil?

I found that there are some who can and do resist the call of the clean page. A few weeks into my research, I extended the invitation to my four 6th-grade ELL reading inclusion students. Among them, Elena, Karla, and Pablo accepted the invitation by taking a notebook. Victor told me he wanted to think about it, and eventually declined. Pablo never did turn in a single entry, and I suppose the notebook still remains blank. In all, I invited ten of my students to write in dialogue journals; eight accepted, one declined, and one didn't fully participate.

AN INVITATION FOR ME TO SEE

I wanted a descriptive vision of what happened when I implemented dialogue journals with diverse language learners. To this end, I took up the ethnographic practice of teacher-researcher with its varied data-collection methods, understanding this would help me to be "better

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equipped . . . to answer any question" (Hubbard & Power, 2003, p. 36). I observed my practice and the various learners for three months by "looking hard and deep" (Hubbard & Power, 2003, p. 38) through systematic and purposeful data collection (Cochran-Smith & Donnell, 2006). Each Wednesday after I wrote in the students' journals, I photocopied our dialogue. In the end, I had 106 entries to review, reread, and ponder. Students also completed a survey on their personal writing habits and writing in the dialogue journals.

In addition to the students' responses, I took over a dozen sets of ethnographic field notes. In a spiral notebook, I first jotted down the setting, time, and participants. While I was teaching, I jotted down our conversations and nonverbal actions. As soon as the students left the classroom, I sat at the computer to type in detail what had just transpired. Later, I would extend these field notes by adding my reflections about how dialogue journals impacted our personal interactions (Hubbard & Power, 2003, p. 45). Ultimately, my data included:

- a record of the number of entries each participant completed
- photocopies of the dialogue journals
- ethnographic field notes
- student surveys
- three transcribed interviews with groups of writers about their thoughts on dialogue journals
- a reflective journal (43 entries) in which I recorded my own insights and curiosities

As the inquiry rolled on and my research, teaching, and writing ensued, I saw that dialogue journals had great power to deepen and enrich my relationship with my students. They allowed me the flexibility to encourage personalized and varied participation in writing, and they provided the opportunity for me to connect to my students with genuine, purposeful responses.

AN INVITATION TO CONNECT TO EACH OTHER

Before dialogue journals, I used to briefly greet Ray and Sara, students who have exited the ELL program, in the hall as they passed. My interac-

tion with them was limited. We never had the time to exchange ideas or experiences. I received occasional informal updates from their classroom teacher and used these reports to satisfy my obligation for monitoring their progress in the mainstream classroom. Journaling together, however, allowed us to enrich our encounters by giving us space on the page to share and learn about each other.

Sara and I Share Our “Cherished Bits of Life”

Ten-year-old Sara, who exited the ELL program two years ago, wrote to me about San Diego, where she previously lived. She wrote about her favorite place, Linda Vista Park, and told of how she had been on almost every ride in Disneyland: “I used to go [to Disneyland and Sea World] every weekend when we lived there.” Her eleven-line entry continued with details of her former home city. I responded, “I didn’t know that you lived so close to Sea World and Disneyland.” I shared my own memorable experiences from these places. I asked her if she missed San Diego and continued my entry, “Did you know that I used to live in New Jersey? I used to visit New York City a lot. I miss being in the city—it is very exciting, and it has the best pizza in the world. Yum.” A few days later, Sara continued our exchange, “I do miss San Diego. I miss it a lot. I went to a Diner in San Diego and they had a big pizza there. I loved living in San Diego. Do you miss New Jersey?” I responded affirmatively, providing her with a list of things I missed about my home state.

Sara proves that writing can be done without a teacher-generated prompt, as she first writes her “own cherished bits of life” (Calkins, 1994, p. 12), and I answer with my own. In addition, these entries show how an invitation to dialogue can foster a writers’ community. As we wrote back and forth, we were coming “together around specific tasks in specific situated practices over time” (Lave, 1996, cited in Faltis, 2006, p. 117). We both learned something about each other we had not known before, and we connected to each other by sharing our similar experiences. Each questioned the other to further the discussion, and when we were satisfied, the topic was dropped. Peyton and Reed (1990) confirm that a true dialogue is when “both parties make substantive contributions of more or less equal length and dis-

cuss topics of mutual interest” (p. 11). Our written interactions displayed such qualities. Through many other entries, Sara and I connected as we exchanged experiences and ideas, nurturing our new community as fellow, long-distance writers in a habit of dialogue journaling.

Toward the end of the data collection, Sara showed further evidence of an enriched relationship. She titled her entry: “Coming Back to School.”

I am so excited it’s the last day of Spring Break. I am ready to come back to school. I miss all my friends and teacher. I want to see them again and tell them how much I missed them. I missed you the most. I wanted to go back and see how spring break was and tell you all I have done but I’m a save it till you see this. So, as you can see coming back to school is a big thing for me.

Her phrase, “I missed you the most,” spoke volumes to me. Here is a student with whom I have no scheduled direct contact hours, and she wrote that she missed me the most. Our interaction through

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the dialogue journal was real and authentic and had a positive impact on our relationship. We were connecting through writing. In my response, I reciprocated the sentiment:

I am so glad you like telling me about your spring break! I really like reading your writing. I was really excited to come back to work/school also. I really like being a teacher. You’re such a great kid, Sara! It makes me feel very special that you missed me the most! I am glad we are writing to each other!

Regardless of the lack of direct contact hours, we co-constructed a community where writing was authentic, student-generated, valued, and shared.

Connie and I Connect through Multicultural Experiences

It was not only in Sara’s journal entries that I saw evidence of stronger connections with my students. I see ten-year-old Connie on a regular basis during the English language development block. She is a quiet girl who has been in the United States less than a year, but when she lived in South Korea, she attended English academy. In her dialogue journal, Connie shared things with me that she had not shared in our personal

conversations. This allowed me to respond similarly. Through her entries, she invited me to see her conflict between missing home and yet liking the United States. Her first journal entry was called, “Korea.” Its 34 lines told me about her home country and her rigorous schedule, which included school, piano lessons, swim classes, English academy, and another after-school academic program. She told me of high school students who are sleep-deprived because of studying for difficult exams. She wrote, “Sometime I like America better than Korea.” In 7 of her 24 entries, she expressed positives and negatives about the United States and about Korea (see Figure 1).

I can empathize with these conflicted feelings, having lived overseas at two separate times during my life. In my responses, I assured Connie that I understood what she was feeling. I encouraged her to keep looking for the “good and bad things in each place,” reminding her that it’s “a good thing to live in two different countries.” A few weeks later, she was having a lonely moment when she wrote the following entry:

I want to go korea back. America is too boring. I'm lonely. I hope time go fast. then I can go korea quick. There's a lot of friend. And a lot of thing I like to do. And school is fun more than here. My friends are more funnier than American friends.

She included in her entry a small photograph of Korea and a sketch of a Korean school. My heart

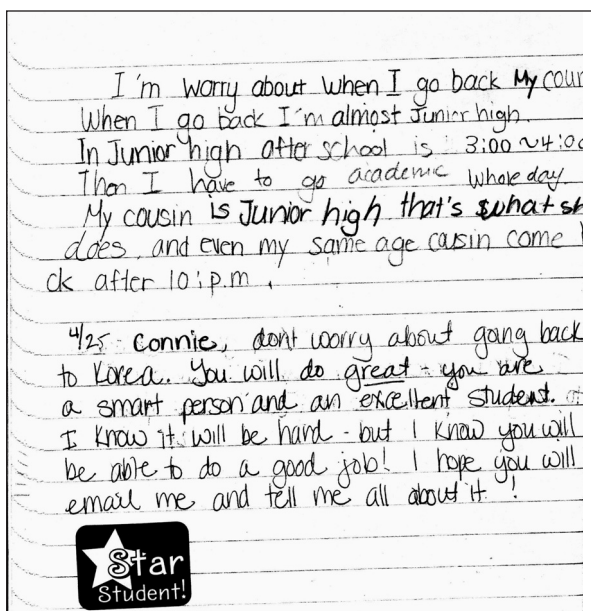


Figure 1. One of Connie's dialogue journal entries with my response.

broke for her, as once again, I made strong connections, through her invitation, with the pain and struggles she felt. I responded, “I know what it is like to miss home and miss your friends. When I lived in Venezuela, I missed America sometimes. Now, I miss Venezuela sometimes. So, tell me, how is school more fun in Korea?” These exchanges show how we were able to connect with each other as we struggled with how to define “home” while living in different countries. Writing to Connie allowed me to use my own past experiences to offer her empathy, opportunities to learn, and encouragement as a mentor.

When her mainstream teacher assigned an open writing topic of “A very important day,” she chose to write about the day she left South Korea. I assisted her with the writing during her scheduled inclusion time. As I provided scaffolding for her brainstorming, I was able to help her reach back into her memories and recall the sights and sounds of that day at Incheon International Airport. Working together, there was a sense of what Blanton (2002) describes as “synchronicity.” Connie and I arrived at a place where we intellectually and emotionally “operated in complete harmony” (Digging Deeper section, ¶ 6). She shared with me what she was feeling during those memorable last moments in South Korea, and we wrote it all down, crafting a beautiful memoir. By enriching our relationship and connecting in her dialogue journal, we achieved a “singularity” in her pursuit of language and literacy (¶ 6).

I recognize how this disrupts the traditional notion of writing as an individual act. Connie's ideas were sparked and refined by the dialogue journal and the collaborative nature of our writing time afterward. Connie confirmed our singularity during an interview, when I asked her if she could think of a time she enjoyed writing. She told me that it was when I helped her write.

Carlos and I Share Participation

I see the way that I position myself in relation to my students as critical. If I remain distant as a mere conveyer of language and knowledge, I am not connecting with learners. I am instead digging a chasm between teacher and student, and in doing so, I am denying full access to our most valuable resources: each other. So, I purposefully try to position myself as a fellow member of a learning community. While writing in their dialogue journals, I straddle the roles of mentor and

co-participant; as I apprentice them into the community of writers, I engage as a co-participant. A recent dialogue journal exchange with Carlos demonstrates this. He asks about my two sons (my responses are in italics):

do Jacob like his new [Nintendo] DS?

Yes! He played his DS all day & night yesterday.

do Jacob and Jackson fiet for the PS2?

Now that Jacob has the DS, they don't fight for the PS2. Jackson gets to play it.

do Jacob like making air plane?

Jacob really likes making paper airplanes. He likes putting things together—Legos, airplanes, anything.

On this particular day, Carlos broke away from his usual pattern of recording yesterday's events and approached me with his questions, to which I responded openly. We began a series of question-answer entries initiated by Carlos. Peyton and Reed (1990) say that this suspension of the traditional teacher and student roles "while they become collaborators in a discussion," is a way to develop a "more equal relationship" (p. 51). These exchanges demonstrate that through my responses, I positioned myself not as an expert imparter of English language, but as a learner, a fellow writer, and a partner sharing my own experiences, thoughts, and feelings.

These interactions with Sara, Connie, and Carlos demonstrate that we were building connections as we shared experiences, memories, information, and bits of each other. Moreover, we wrote for purposes greater than standardized test preparation.

AN INVITATION FOR ME TO RESPOND WITH PURPOSE

"Even when I'm doing math," Ray said, "I just take it out and read it." In a group interview, I had just asked three of my writers if they were able to practice reading in their dialogue journals. Ray responded positively and added, "I like reading your responses. I sit there and read them like all day." The other two boys, Carlos and Ahmed, agreed that they liked reading what I had written to them. Ahmed contributed, "What I like about writing is that I'm excited what you're going to write right here." I came to realize that my stu-

dents diligently read and greatly valued my personal responses in their dialogue journals.

Knowing the students were carefully reading what I wrote to them and enjoying it encouraged me to respond thoughtfully and purposefully to each of my writers. For instance, I offered students opportunities to learn new information about the topics they raised. Ray wrote of his fascination with television: "You know what surprises me the most? That it goes all day and all night. It even can play your favorite video games." I expanded this topic by telling him what the "old" days were like: "When I was little, TV did not have remotes. My older brothers would make *me* get up and change the channels very often—during commercials, when they got tired of a show . . ." When he wrote to me about his favorite sport, basketball, I introduced him to mine, field hockey. When he wrote to me about a quick trip to Miami, I informed him that Miami is known as the unofficial capital of Latin America.

Connie wrote a comical entry about her two dogs, Sugar and Dorothy. "I think their hobby is poop & peep everywhere. That's grows hobby. I'm tired of clean their poop & peep, well—My mom always do that." I laughed out loud and immediately wrote back, "Your writing is funny!

I enjoyed reading about Sugar and Dorothy. I think you are right—they need to find another hobby."

Some entries I didn't respond to immediately, but instead I took extra time to plan out my response. Sara had already written once about the bliss of friendship. In her second entry on the topic, she closed with, "Me and my friends are all best friends and always [will] be." That statement stopped my pen in mid-air. Perhaps it's cynical of me, or perhaps it's because at that time I was counseling with two sixth-grade girls who used to be best friends, but I found her statement to be naive. I thought before I wrote. Do I share that not all friendships last forever? I decided against my initial reaction, yet still attempted to push her thoughts on the subject a bit:

You've written before about friendship—which tells me it's important to you. I think school would almost be unbearable without friends! Can you imagine having no one to hang out with at lunch or recess? I always feel sad when I see a student

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all by himself or herself. I think he or she must feel very lonely.

Another entry that stopped my pen in mid-air was that of Elena's lost friendship with Karla; they were no longer "B.F.F." After I read of her confusion and hurt, I felt a flood of emotions. I recorded them in my own research journal:

I [am] struck with how Elena entrusted me with a really hurtful topic—which started the second day of school . . . that led me to realize how important my response to her would be. I had a moment of panic, "I don't know what to say to her!" aaaahhh—this is too personal—and it was unexpected. If it had been a person-to-person encounter, I know I would not have handled it as well. That moment of panic would have frozen my tongue. The time to defrost was helpful. I made myself remember what it was like to be a 6th grader? I saw my own junior high, Jefferson Middle School; I saw myself with braces and straggly blonde hair; I saw the drab metal lockers, and it hit me. I have been through the desertion of a best friend and it happened in 6th grade. I wrote Elena my story with my perspective. I am awed how Elena opened her world to me.

I was also amazed at how the generosity of time, made possible by written responses, allowed me to respond to each student in a powerfully personalized way. Harklau (2002) maintains, "a distinguishing characteristic of print is the possibility for language learners to interact without the pressures of face-to-face communication" (¶ 3). I hoped my students were finding this to be true because this was now my truth.

AN INVITATION FOR STUDENTS TO PERSONALIZE PARTICIPATION

Just as the population I work with is diverse, so was their participation in the dialogue journals. Not only did the frequency with which they wrote differ, but they also used the journal writing for different purposes. Some did not choose to participate as often as others, and when I delved into the reasons, Karla wrote on her survey, "I don't know what to write in a journal because some stuff is personal and I don't know what to write about so I like it when teachers give you topics." When I ques-

tioned Ahmed during our interview, he replied, "Well, I don't have a prompt or anything." Their limited engagement showed not only a diversity of participation, but it revealed a limited view of writing. These students' expectation is one in which the teacher or standardized test supplies the input and the student, on demand, writes a controlled response within the given length and time limits.

Ray, however, didn't need prompts for his writing. The topics of his entries varied from a retelling of his weekend, to writing about his athletic activities, to his fascination with television. He thought his dialogue journal improved his writing. In our interview, he said, "Well, I used to get C's on my writing and now we did a writing sample and I got a B+ on it." I asked him how he thought that happened. "Because I practice on it."

Carlos was yet another student who saw the journal as a way to grow in language construction. In interviews, he expressed that writing in the journal was "nice [because] I can learn more writing and reading." He elaborates, "After I write it I have to read if it's good." For Carlos, the journaling helped him "learn how more to write in English" and "learn English words." In that same interview, Carlos defined good writers as individuals who know how to spell words correctly. Keeping this in mind, mid-

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way through our data collection, Carlos and I adopted a strategy suggested by Peyton and Reed (1990). After Carlos repeatedly asked me if his spellings were correct, I told him to underline any word he was uncertain of,

and I would use the same word in my response and underline it as well. He used the strategy in the next nine out of ten of entries. On March 29, I observed him looking back to my response from March 21 to determine the spelling of "stay inside," a phrase we had both underlined. He used the dialogue journal to gain confidence as a speller, writer, reader, and learner of English. When I asked him if he was going to keep the journal when he returned to Venezuela, he responded, "Yes. In Venezuela, there's no English so I can *practicando* [practicing]." The journal, for Carlos, was a medium for honing aspects of language construction.

Carolyn, a newcomer from Seoul, South Korea, diligently wrote three sentences every day in her journal, just as I asked her (see Figure 2). She did not take many risks speaking with me and answered with a nod or short response. But in her

| | |
|--------------------------------|----------------------------|
| 3/9 | |
| Today is Friday! | I really like Spring |
| Next is Spring Break | also! Did you |
| I like Spring. | have a nice break? |
| 3/10/02 | |
| I like china | I would really like to go |
| china is very big. | to China someday. My |
| china child is very cute. | friend has 2 children from |
| | China. |
| 3/20/02 | |
| I like my Korea friend. | Do you have any |
| Korea friend is very goodness. | Korean friends here? |
| Korea friend is nice. | |
| 3/21/02 | |
| I like my Korea teache. | I hope you will |
| teache is very good. | learn a lot from |
| I like Korea | your American |
| | teachers also. I |
| | like having you! |

Figure 2. Some of Carolyn's dialogue journal entries with my responses.

journal, she shared about her dog, her family, going to church, liking music, liking Korea. Carolyn illustrated that "students who are literate in their native language and more advanced educationally can begin to write independently in their journal very early" (Peyton and Reed, 1990, p. 46). De la Luz Reyes (1991) also found that such students "can and do attempt to write English before they have complete control over the oral and written system on the second language" (p. 297). Carolyn, with her three-line entries, used the journal to take some of her first risks in English.

Each learner is unique. Connie asked culturally related questions; Sara was prolific in extending our written dialogue; Elena used the journal as a safe place to share; Carlos used it to improve his spelling. As Peyton and Reed (1990) summarize: "Journal interaction can take whatever form it needs to take, depending on the goals of the teachers and the needs and interests of the students involved" (p. 55). I saw every individual participate in their own way. For those who chose to write, I watched, with great pleasure, as they amplified their writing experiences.

AN INVITATION FOR ME TO REFLECT, PONDER, AND WONDER

I was recently at a professional meeting and had the chance to chat with some colleagues about

my inquiry. At one point, I commented on how I knew dialoguing with diverse language learners in a journal was not a new practice. "Oh yeah," commented one of my colleagues, "I used to do that. I should do it again." Her comments made me wonder why she had stopped. Like Peyton and Reed (1990), who discuss time as the only drawback of dialogue journals, I wondered if she struggled to find the time required to write an individual response to each participant. I understood this concern all too well, but when the results are a stronger connection with my learners, I knew that it was time well invested. Dialogue journals provided a very effective way for my learners and me to connect. I was able to see their writing in a fresh way on a regular basis. I was able to hear their voices as they wrote to me about matters that were important to them.

Like all thorough research projects, mine generated questions for my practice. During the interviews, when I asked the participants to describe themselves as writers, none of my students saw themselves as good writers. I wonder if over time, through the regular use of dialogue journals, they might begin to change that concept. As for those students who wanted a teacher-generated topic, perhaps I could write in my dialogue journal first, and have them respond to me. Maybe after my modeling, they would begin to feel more comfortable generating their own topics in their dialogue journals. Finally, at the end of my study, I noticed a curious dynamic. As I slowed the collection of their journals, began the lengthy process of writing up my research, and stopped taking field notes, I saw shorter and less frequent entries. It would appear that my motivation for generating data could have been a motivation for my learners to write, validating that the researcher-teacher always impacts the environment in which she works. I wondered, too, if as they saw these activities lessen, they began to believe that I was less committed to them and their writing. These questions remain with me and will prompt me to look deeper into what happens when I implement dialogue journals in an elementary setting with diverse language learners.

Elena and Karla never did become B.F.F. again. I wasn't expecting that; but all three of us did sit down and talk about what had happened and what was happening. In the elementary setting, with so many diverse students, the use of a small yellow composition notebook and a practice

called dialogue journals invited my students and me to become more connected. While I started with the intention of connecting to their writing, I ended by connecting to their lives.

Author's Notes

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